

**AFRICA IN THE ROMAN IMAGINATION. THE PERSONIFICATION OF THE
GODDESS AFRICA IN THE PANEGRIC ON MAIORIANUS BY SIDONIUS
APOLLINARIS
(CARM. 5, 53-350).**

Sidonius Apollinaris, a leading figure of the Gallo-Roman aristocracy,¹ was among the last writers of the Western Roman Empire and witnessed the decline of the Roman world. In the last years, several studies have contributed to outline a clearer picture of Sidonius' poetry.² Sidonius' *imitatio* unfolds according to a particularly dense allusive network; as Gualandri underlines, he seems to challenge his friends—the readers of his literary productions—to a sort of race: they must recognize the *furtivae lectiones*, the hidden literary echoes in his jewelled, refined, enigmatic style.³ Sidonius recited the Panegyric on Majorian in Lyon on January 459 (or on 28th December 458) for the *adventus* of the emperor.⁴ In 456 Majorian with the powerful Ricimer defeated the previous emperor Avitus, Sidonius' father in law and leading figure of the Gallo-Roman aristocracy. The Gallo-Roman nobility did not accept Avitus' removal and death. There was a conspiracy against Majorian, the *Marcelliana coniuratio*.⁵

Majorian crushed Lyon's rebellion; his *adventus* in Lyon and Sidonius' *recitatio* of the Panegyric had an important politic function: to restore the *concordia* between the

¹ Sidonius Apollinaris (430-486) is author of 24 *carmina* (he wrote three Panegyrics for the emperors Avitus, Majorianus and Anthemius) and of 9 books of *epistulae*. For Sidonius' life see Stevens (1933), Harries (1994) and Mascoli (2010).

² See especially Consolino (1974); Gualandri (1979); Roberts (1989); Colton (2000); Santelia, (2002); Condorelli (2008); Van Waarden (2010); Lobato (2012).

³ Gualandri, I. (1979), p. 85. For Sidonius' poetics see Condorelli (2008). For Sidonius' panegyric see these critical editions: Anderson (1936); Loyen (1960); Bellès (1989). See also these studies. Loyen (1967); Mathisen (1991); Reydellet (1981); Bonjour (1982); Watson (1998); Consolino (2000: 190-195); Condorelli (2008: 20-25); Stoehr-Monjou (2009); Consolino (2011); Montone (2011).

⁴ For the emperor Majorian see Max (1975); Martindale (1980: 702-703); Mathisen (1998). For Sidonius' Panegyric on Majorian see Loyen (1967: 59-84); Oost (1964); Max (1979); Rousseau (2000); Mennella (2000); Giovannini (2001); Brolli (2003/2004); Oppedisano (2009); *Ibid.* (2011); Álvarez Jiménez (2011).

⁵ See Mathisen (1979); Zecchini (1983: 295-99); Köhler (1995: 288-333).

Gallic nobility and the new emperor. Sidonius, in order to relate Majorian's exploits, uses a literary *topos*, already applied by Claudian in *De Bello Gildonico*: the Personification of Goddess Africa. After the *exordium* (ll. 1-12), a *Roma Bellatrix* (ll. 13-39) gives all the personified provinces a hearing. Every Province gives Rome her typical product; the Goddess Africa comes at the end; she is *infelix*; she cries; her head is prostrate for the impositions of Genseric, the king of Vandals, who occupied Africa in 439. In a long *adlocutio* (ll. 56-349), she asks Maiorinus for her *ultor* and saviour.

In the proem of her *adlocutio* the Goddess Africa laments the Vandalic oppression⁶ and remembers the most important enemies defeated by Rome in her long history: Porsenna, Brennus and especially Hannibal, who was able to arrive in proximity of the *Urbs*. The memory of the cruel Punic general precedes that of Genseric, the new Hannibal who now terrifies the Roman Empire; Sidonius introduces one of the *leitmotiv*⁷ of his Panegyrics: the war against Genseric will be the fourth Punic War. Majorian will have the nickname of *Africanus* (ll. 85-87; 100-104) after the two *Scipiones*, thanks to the success of the war against the Vandals:

*me quoque (da veniam quod bellum gessimus olim)
post Trebiam Cannasque domas, Romanaque tecta
Hannibal ante meos quam nostra Scipio vidit.*⁸

.....quid quod tibi princeps
est nunc eximius, quem praescia saecula clamant
venturum excidio Libyae, qui tertius ex me
accipiet nomen? Debent hoc fata labori,
Maoriane, tuo".⁹ 100

⁶ For Vandals' history see Francovich Onesti (2002).

⁷ Cf. ll. 530-535; *carm.* 7, 444-446, 550-556; 588; *carm.* 2, 348-351 and Álvarez Jiménez, D. (2011).

⁸ "Me also (forgive me that I warred with thee aforetime) thou didst crush after the Trebia and Cannae, yet my Hannibal viewed Rome's roofs ere Scipio saw ours". For Sidonius' text and for the English translation I use Anderson (1936) and Anderson et al. (1965).

⁹ "And hast thou not now a peerless prince, whom the prophetic ages proclaim as destined for Lybia's destruction, and who shall be the third to get an added name from me? To thy toil, Majorian, fate owes this guerdon".

Post Trebiam Cannasque is an echo, with a little *variatio*, of Claud. *Stil. Cos. 3*, 145, ...*Cannas...Trebiamque; venturum excidio Libyae* echoes Verg. *Aen. 1*, 22. Virgilian *imitatio* emphasized Majorian's sacred mission: he must realize again the famous prophecy, well known by Juno: the destruction of Cartago was in the fate of Rome.

In ll. 107-327a Africa praises Majorian; she remembers his birth, his youthful successes, his acts in wartime and peacetime. In ll. 327b-346 Africa gives an infamous picture of the Vandals and of Genseric: he is an unwarlike and drunk man. He is worse than Hannibal during his "otii Capuani":

<i>ipsi autem color exsanguis, quem crapula vexat,</i>	
<i>et pallens pinguedo tenet, ganeaque perenni</i>	340
<i>pressus acescentem stomachus non explicat auram.</i>	
<i>par est vita suis. Non sic Barcaeus opimam</i>	
<i>Hannibal ad Capuam periit, cum fortia bello</i>	
<i>inter delicias mollirent corpora Baiae</i>	
<i>et se Lucrinas qua vergit Gaurus in undas</i>	345
<i>bracchia Massylus iactaret nigra natator.</i> ¹⁰	

Sidonius echoes Claudian, who represents Stilicho as a new Scipio and Gildo a new Hannibal (*Stil Cos. 3*, pr. 21-22: *noster Scipiades Stilicho, quo concidit alter / Hannibal antiquo saevior Hannibale*). Further, Claudian gives a similar picture of Gildo (*Gild. 444-445: Umbratus dux ipse rosis et marcidus ibit / unguentis crudusque cibo titubansque Lyaeo*). Gildo and Geiseric have Hannibal's wildness, but not his physical and moral qualities (cf. the famous picture of Liv. 21, 4). *Ipsi color exsanguis* is an echo of Sallustius' phrase *color ei exsanguis* (*Cat. 15, 5*), used to describe another enemy of Rome, Catilina. Note also the use of prosaic words, as *autem*, *pinguedo*, *ganea*, *acescentem*, rarely attested in poetry, and especially in epic

¹⁰ "His cheeks are bloodless; a drunkard's heaviness afflicts him, pallid flabbiness possesses him, and his stomach, loaded with continual gluttony, cannot rid himself of the sour wind. His followers live like him: Hannibal of Barca's race was not so utterly undone in affluent Capua's land, when Baiae enfeebled amid all its allurements bodies that were strong for war, and the Massylian took to swimming and flourished his swarthy arms about where Gaurus stoops down to the Lucrine waters".

poetry.¹¹ Sidonius uses functional language to describe a comic character; Genseric doesn't belong to the epic world and he can't be described with epic words. The *sententia par est vita suis* is the strongest blame of the lascivious Valdalic people. Genseric is worse than Hannibal during the "otii Capuani", when an unexpected enemy defeated him for the first time: the *Campania felix*. The Italian region was able to soften the *duritia* of Hannibal and of the Carthaginian army. *Barcaeus opimam / Capuam* echoes a Vergil's phrase (*Aen.* 1, 621-622, ...*Belus opimam / ...Cyprum*). Note one of the rhetorical devices used by Sidonius to make the clash between the *duritia* of the strong Carthaginian soldiers and Campania's delights: *fortia bello / corpora*, an echo, with a little *variatio*, of Verg. *Aen.* 8, 150, *fortia bello / robora*, is opposed to the phrase *inter delicias*, attested in poetry before Sidonius, in identic initial position, in Mart. 1, 59, 2 and 7, 88, 2 (referring in both passages to the softness of Baia). The conflict between *Campania felix* and the strong Punic army is expressed in Sidonius' text by the opposition between two antithetical poetic souls: an/the epic magniloquent tone contrasts with the lightness of epigrammatic poetry. Note also the silver verse (l. 346): the terrible Punic soldier became a swimmer, who enjoys the pleasures of Campania's lakes (perhaps there is an echo of Mart. 4, 57, 1, *Dum nos blanda tenent lascivi stagna Lucrini*).

In the final *peroratio*, the *leitmotiv*, already mentioned, appears: the military campaign against Genseric will be the fourth war between Rome and Carthage; once again Sidonius uses very famous Virgilian phrases: the Goddess Africa invokes, like Dido, an *ultor* (ll. 347-350):

'atque ideo hunc dominum saltem post saecula tanta
ultorem mihi redde, precor, ne dimicet ultra
Carthago Italiam contra. Sic fata dolore
ingemuit lacrimisque preces adiuvit abortis.¹²

350

¹¹ Cf. *ThLL*, s. v.

¹² "So do thou, I pray thee, give me but this one lord after these many ages to be my avenger, that so Carthage may cease to war against Italy".

If the queen of Carthage called for an avenger able to destroy Rome, the goddess Africa hopes, with the solemn words of the national poem of Rome, for a Roman avenger able to free herself from her cruel *dominus*¹³. If Genseric is comparable to the Hannibal of the “*otii Capuani*”, Majorian was able to equal the Punic general in his most important exploit: the crossing of the Alps. Sidonius devotes a later section of the Panegyric (ll. 510-552) to the description of this feat (Silius is obviously the model for Sidonius).¹⁴ The ascent of the Alps, however, was not merely the prerogative of Hannibal. It was, in fact, a commonplace of panegyric literature, functional to the exaltation of the virtues of the emperor, as the perfect *vir militaris*.¹⁵ Majorian shows again all the qualities that are lacking in Genseric: he is the first proceeding through the snow and ice, opening the way to the army (ll. 513 s.: *primus pede carpis et idem / ludrica praemisso firmas vestigia conto*); he reaches the top, encouraging the chilly troops (ll. 532 s.: *en vertice summo / algentes cogit turmas*). Sidonius follows a literary strategy with important ideological meaning; he tries to dismantle—to exorcise—the parallel Genseric-Hannibal. If the Vandal king can boast of the sack of Rome and can perhaps present himself as a new Hannibal, it is true that, in the opinion of Sidonius, he is comparable to the Carthaginian general for brutality, but not for military merits. He is comparable only to the Hannibal of the “*otii Capuani*”, not to that of the crossing of the Alps, the exploit realized by Hannibal, by the greatest leaders of Rome and by Majorian. These men, therefore, equalled

¹³ The *ultio* recalls of course the famous oath of Aetius; this commonplace appears, for example, in the official propaganda of Aetius; it is attested in an official inscription and in the Second Panegyric recited by the Hispano-Roman poet Merobaudes on January 1 446 (ll. 130-132).

¹⁴ See Brolli (2003/2004).

¹⁵ It appears in the panegyric of Pliny to Trajan (12, 2-3), in *Latin Panegyrics* (III [XI] 9; IX [XII] XII 3.3 and [II] 45, 4, in Claudian (7, 89 ff. and 26, 340 ff.), as well as in the epic tradition: in one of the poetic passages of the *Satyricon*, the *Bellum Civile* (ll. 122, 144-82 e 123, 183-208), Petronius remembers the crossing of the Alps by Caesar (ll. 122, 144-82 e 123, 183-208), that Lucan summarised in a verse (1, 183, *iam gelidas Caesar cursu superaverat Alpes*).

and surpassed in value and *duritia* the Carthaginian general. Genseric cannot compete with Majorian, since the Roman emperor has in himself even the best qualities of Hannibal.

The literary model for Sidonius was Claudian; the Egyptian writer does not only often assimilate Gildo to Hannibal and Alaric, but uses, before Sidonius, the same literary strategy, as is well demonstrated by Dewar.¹⁶ In *De Bello Getico* Claudian rapidly evokes the passage of the Alps by Alaric (ll. 197-200); in ll. 319-363, however, he describes the military campaigns of Stilicho in *Retia* against the Vandals in the winter of 401-402.¹⁷ Stilicho surpasses Alaric in the endurance of cold and snow, already proved by Hannibal, and revenges the Alps violated by the barbarians.

Thus Sidonius' Panegyric was an important support to the foreign policy of the *princeps*. The Gallo-Roman aristocracy, who had supported the two strongest enemies of Majorianus, Aetius and Avitus, could find in the war against the Vandals an act of continuity with the political programme of the previous emperor. The reconstituted relationship between Majorian and the Gallo-Roman dignitaries was not window dressing; it was one of the reasons that alienated the support of the Italic aristocracy to Majorian.¹⁸ Sidonius, therefore, demolishes, through the historical *exemplum* of Hannibal, the terrible Genseric.

After these remarks, we can now analyse the opening words of the speech of the Goddess Africa, whose allusive echoes we are now able to decode clearly:

.....*Subito flens Africa nigras
procubuit lacerata genas et cernua frontem*

¹⁶ Cf. Dewar (1994).

¹⁷ Cf. Dewar (1994), p. 352: "It is Stilicho, not Alaric, whom we see enduring the cold and the snow, and leaving the Alpine shepherd awe-struck at his fortitude in a fully developed literary sequence rather than in a few brief and scattered mentions. And so it is that the Alps, though violated, are avenged (*Get.* 194-95), and, since Stilicho returned from *Raetia* with recruits for the imperial army (*Get.* 400-401), Claudian declares: *illae tibi, Roma, salute / Alpinae peperere casae*".

¹⁸ Oppedisano (2009).

iam male fecundas in vertice fregit aristas 55
ac sic orsa loqui: Venio pars tertia mundi
infelix felice uno. Famula satus olim
hic praedo et dominis extinctis barbara dudum
sceptra tenet tellure mea penitusque fugata
nobilitate furens quod non est non amat hospes. 60
o Latii sopite vigor, tua moenia ridet
*insidiis cecidisse suis: non concutis hastam?*¹⁹

Sidonius' model is obviously Claudian (*Gild.* 134-139):

cum procul insanis quatiens ululatibus axem
et contusa genas mediis apparet in astris 135
Africa: rescissae vestes et spicea passim
serta iacent; lacero crinales vertice dentes
et fractum pendebat ebur, talique superbas
*irrupit clamore fores:...*²⁰

Claudian follows, as in *Stil.* Cos 2, 256 ff., the traditional iconography of Africa, portrayed as a woman, wearing an ivory ornament and having ears of corn. Sidonius, however, melds Claudian's reminiscences, as usual in his *jeweled style*,²¹ with echoes of other texts. *Flens Africa* could be an echo of Prud. *Perist.* 13, 96, [...] *Flevit Africa. Nigras / [...] lacerata genas* is a *variatio* of Sil. 2, 560, *maestas lacerata genas*²². *Procubuit* is probably another Virgilian reminiscence (the Augustan poet puts it 5 times in the *incipit* of hexameters); see especially *Aen.* 11, 150, *super procubuit atque haeret lacrimasque gemensque*, already echoed by Claudian (*Gild.* 27, *Procubuit, tales orditur maestas querellas*), for the description of the Goddess

¹⁹ "Of a sudden Africa flung herself down weeping, with her swarthy cheeks all torn. Bowing her forehead she broke the corn-ears that crowned her, ears whose fruitfulness was now her bane; and thus she began: "I come, a third part of the world, unfortunate because one man is fortunate. This man, son of a slave-woman, hath long been a robber; he hath blotted out our rightful lords, and for many a day hath wielded his barbarian scepter in my land, and having driven our nobility utterly away this stranger loves nothing that is not mad. O slumbering energy of Latium! He makes scornful boast that thy walls yielded to his cunning. Wilt thou not then brandish the spear?"

²⁰ "Shaking heaven with distraught cries, Africa, her cheeks torn, appeared in the distance advancing amid the stars. Torn was her raiment, scattered her crown of corn. Her head was wounded and the ivory comb that secured her hair hung loose and broken. She rushed into Heaven's halls shouting thus:...". For *The Bello Gildonico*, I cite Platnauer's translation: Platnauer (1976).

²¹ Cf. Roberts (1989), a very important book about the poetics of Late Antique Literature.

²² Cf. also Sil. 4, 774 and Avien. *Arat.* 333.

Rome, whose *adlocutio* precedes that of Africa. The rare *cernuus*²³ emphasises the state of prostration of the province personified.

Even the opening words of the *adlocutio* of the goddess Africa are an echo of ll. 61-62 of *De Bello Gildonico*: *tertia pars mundi / unius praedonis ager*. The unpoetic Sidonius' expression *hic praedo* collides with the poetic *famula satus*; Sidonius echoes Claudian, who uses the word *praedo* three times in referring to Gildo (v. 69, 162, 458). The phrase *pars tertia mundi* was an echo of Ov. *Met.* 5, 372, *pars [...]* *tertia mundi*, and Lucan. 9, 411, *pars tertia Libye rerum*. *Infelix* is, of course, a clear echo of Vergil; the epithet is used several times by Vergil for Dido²⁴; as pointed out *supra*, the Goddess Africa is assimilated to Dido also in the final *peroratio*. *Sceptra tenet* is an echo of *sceptra tenens* of Verg. *Aen.* 1, 57, referring to Aeolus, the king of the winds, in the same initial position. The Goddess Africa defines *hospes* Geiseric; the Vandal King, a *foederatus*, now is the *dominus* of Africa; perhaps Sidonius echoes Verg. *Aen.* 4, 323, [...] *cui me moribundam hospes* (Dido laments that the *hospes*, Aeneas, abandoned her dying). The *Latii sopite vigor* is an echo of Claudian (*De Bello Gildonico*, l. 209: *Continuo redit ille vigor*) and of Silius: 16, 11, *sed vigor hausurus Latium*. Then Africa remembers the terrible sack of Rome by Genseric in 455.²⁵ The Africa concludes her speech asking Rome to lift the bar (*concutis hastam*); it is another echo of Silius (16, 108, *concutit hastam [...]*): the two Sidonius' lines open and close with echoes of Silius, the poet of the war with Carthage, which Majorian will have to fight again.

²³ As explained by Nonius (p. L. 30), *cernuus* dicitur proprie inclinatus almost quod terram cernit.

²⁴ The literary record of Dido and Genseric's occupation of Africa appear in connection even in the aforementioned second panegyric of Merobaudes, a possible model for Sidonius (ll. 24-26).

²⁵ The image of Geiseric mocking the walls of Rome (*Ridet tua moenia*), who managed to break in, anticipating the *Romanae tecta* / Hannibal [...] *vidit* of ll. 86 f., suggesting the parallel Hannibal-Genseric then demolished by Sidonius.

In conclusion, Sidonius uses the personification of the goddess Africa to outline that Majorian is the only resource available to get rid of the terrible Genseric. The poet, in addition, gives a new ideological value to Virgil's, Silius' and Claudian's phrases; the two most famous persons of the mythical and historical Africa, Dido and Hannibal, have an important role too. The Punic Queen hovers like a shadow behind the image of Africa torn and prostrate, *infelix*, humiliated by a *hospes* against whom she invokes Maorianus as an *Ultor*. The references to Hannibal, instead, have the task of exorcising the threat of Genseric; he can only compete with the Hannibal of the *Otii Capuani*; he equalises the Carthaginian leader only in brutal ferocity. Therefore, there is an ideological coherence between the programme of the *princeps* and the panegyric. Sidonius tells his compatriots that in Majorian they now have to hope for the *renovatio* of Rome. Unfortunately both Maorianus' expedition against Genseric and that of Anthemius (467-472), the third emperor with whom Sidonius cooperated, were doomed to failure. The fall of the Western Roman Empire was inexorably closer. Sidonius, who became bishop of Clermont-Ferrand, after leading the resistance in Auvergne against the Visigoths with his brother in law Ecdicius, would have to bear the shame of exile, finally dying in his home under a barbarian king, Euricus. He is conscious of the fall of the Roman institutions²⁶: in the *Epist.* 8, 2, 2 (478 d. C.) the author writes that only the culture can yet distinguish Romans from barbarians, because there were not any more *gradus dignitatum*:

*nam iam remotis gradibus dignitatum per quas solebant ultimo a quoque summus quisque discerni, solum erit posthac nobilitatis indicium litteras nosse.*²⁷

²⁶ Cf. Harries (1994: 17).

²⁷ "For now that the old degrees of official rank are swept away, those degrees by which the highest in the land used to be distinguished from the lowest, the only token of nobility will henceforth be a knowledge of letters."

The literary knowledge, as Mathisen²⁸ writes, became a “strategy of survival”; the Gallo-Roman aristocracy tries to safe itself thanks to the literary tradition, the only unifying factor. By saving the literary tradition this nobility hopes to save the myth of Rome.

F. MONTONE
University of Naples “Federico II”
francesco.montone@unina.it

²⁸ Mathisen (1993: 105-118).

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